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New Eden, Melanesia

by

Luther Allen

'... a masterpiece of God . . . a temple of the Holy Spirit . . .'

Pius XII

I

I sprawl on the decking
Of a wrecked barge
The surf awash around it.
The morning air is clear
The sky has something of the sea's profundity
The sea has something of the lightness of the air.
Last night's diluvian rain
Washed clean the conscience of the world
And all is young again
Is ready for a Venus-birth.

The long and glowing curve of sand
The broad sea-brink
Plays natural host to man.
Alone, in pairs, in groups,
Small human figures dominate
The sea and land.
I am witness of a great rebirth.

Between the mindless forest and the mindless sea
Common humanity
In simple nakedness
Resumes its ancient dignity
Asserts its worth.
The uniform
Which never really had the man
Is shed
And lies, a pile of rags,
Staining the golden earth.
Here reigns the common rank,
The highest,
Humanhood.
Pico, Montaigne, Le Nain and, yes, Poussin
Stand at my elbow beaming
'At last he's understood!'

II

Before me three young men
With arms upflung
And swaying in their progress,
Water glistening on their fluent-moving backs,
Foam swirling round their flanks,
Push forward
Against the shoreward surge.
Each body all involved from wrist to toe
Powered by an urgent will, carefree,
Dancing a deliberate dance they go
Into the dancing sea.

III

Before me on the beach
A boy lies prone
Arms flung infant-wise above his head,
His legs wide-spread.
His eyes are closed, his mask is bland,
Dreamless he lies,
Abandoned and undone,
He-bride of the sun,
Between the hot sky and the hotter sand.
Spirit and sense are twins new-born
In the young flesh, tired, worn.

IV

I raise my eyes, approaching me
Two stalwarts hand in hand
Ambling along the boulevard of sand,
Laughing and looking out to sea.
The palm which lately cradled the grenade
To the friend's palm is laid
As an unconscious token:
'We live!
'Our comrades died, went mad, were broken.'
In these last two love is intensified
By that of all life-loving friends who died.
Suddenly one of them again is struck
By a surging sense of their great good luck.
Lord! What a luxury!
Simply to be alive and free!
He breaks away and dashes toward the waves
Laughing and leaping.
Froth of the heart-spring's weeping?

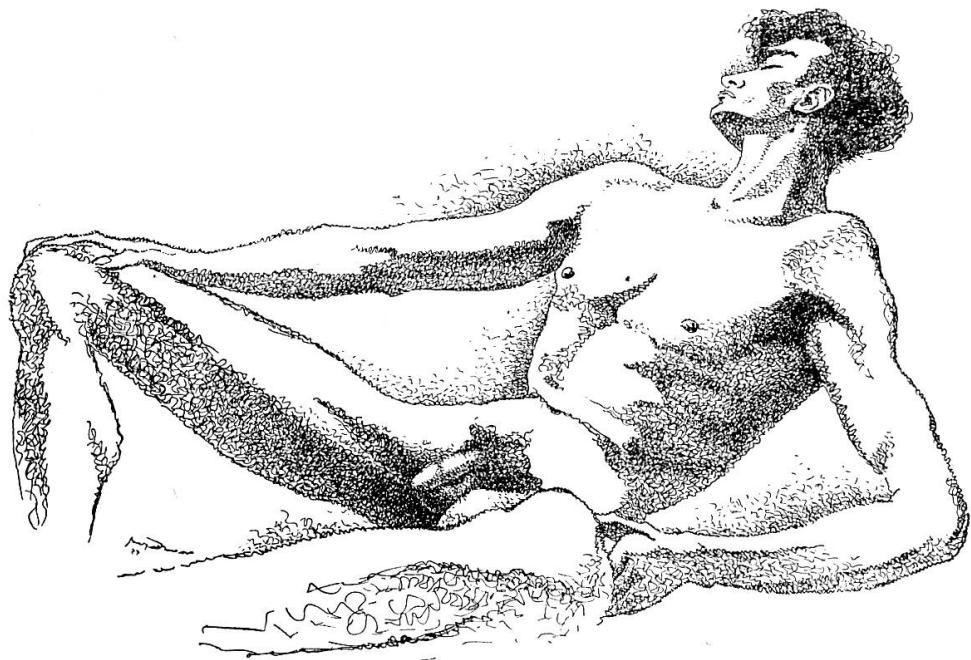
V

The unknown soldier said:
'Have another cigarette before I go?
'You're lucky, camping always on the beach, you
know . . .'
I asked him 'Why?'
'Well . . . It's California's ocean too.
'You feel like it almost belongs to you,
'It's almost part of home, now ain't that so?'
'It was a long way out,
'We've got a long way back to go . . .'
'Yes, that's true,
'But just the same, I sort of envy you . . .'

On the wrecked barge's deck,
Between the sea and me,
Orange against the ocean's green
The unknown soldier sat
Poised as reposeful and serene
As the young Adam in the Sistine ceiling,
Newly roused by God to life, to feeling,
In the world's sweet morning light;
Young Adam yet to know the night, and fear,
Ignorant of the sense of loss and of desire,
Young Adam yet to shed a tear,

Fresh Adam yet to tire.
Perfect Adam, Godly built,
Free of blemish and of guilt.

God knows before me sat
A better man than that!
A youth both long and well
Acquainted with a very actual hell,
Bearing the guilt
Of blood his smooth hands spilt,
Almost at home with the attenuated terror,
Living—with death the price of slightest error—
Tautly alert by dangerous day and treacherous night
Though weighted, drugged by ceaseless weariness,
A tyrant to himself when hurt or when in fright;
Before God, I confess it seemed to me
Christ's master-agony
Is in our time well-matched by such as he.



Two drawings by Mario de Graaf